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## Increasing the Literacy of Unmotivated Young Adolescent African American Males

Ashley Chesnut

Dr. Karynne Kleine  
Faculty Sponsor

### ABSTRACT

In response to the question “How can I increase the literacy of the unmotivated African American males whom I teach?,” two literature groups were established with eight fifth grade African American male students from a public elementary school in Milledgeville, Georgia. In order to investigate the influence of mentors on the literacy, behavior, motivation, and social development of these students, an African American male college sophomore led one group, and I, a Caucasian female student teacher, led the other literature group. Data was obtained via observations of the participants in these two groups. Throughout this study, changes in the academic performance and the behavior of these students were noted, and as the quality of the relationship between the participants and their mentor increased so did the performance of the participants either in literacy skill, motivation, or behavior. As a result of this study, I have determined that female mentors are able to assist young adolescent African American males in improving their literacy. However, African American males have a significantly enhanced ability to positively influence both the behavior and the cultural identity of this group of students.

### Advice to Future Scholars and Students

This venture has been intellectually challenging and worthwhile, but it would have been of shorter duration had I received and thoroughly read all of the guidelines and instructions before completing the required paperwork. As a result, it took over four months to receive approval from the Institutional Review Board, and although the body of the thesis has been written for several weeks, formatting the thesis in accordance with APA and the Scholars Program regulations was time consuming. Therefore, I suggest that individuals who participate in a similar endeavor obtain all guidelines for this project and thoroughly adhere to them.

### Acknowledgements

Although Dr. Karynne L. M. Kleine presented me with the opportunity to

participate in the Scholars Program, my motivation for engaging in this project was God. As a result of prayer and Scripture, I felt led to extend my research project involving the literacy of young adolescent African American males. Because of God's promise in Jeremiah 29:11, I know that He has a purpose for my involvement in this venture. He deserves the credit for its results because it is through His power that I have completed this task.

Dr. Karynne L. M. Kleine was my project advisor for this Scholars Project, and she has my sincere gratitude for her insight and her willingness to direct me through this endeavor.

My parents, Charles and Penny Chesnut, have been wonderful encouragers and supporters throughout my life but especially with this project, and I am so blessed to have such a wonderful family.

Finally, this project would not have been possible without the help of Roderick Sylvester, Ryan Maraziti, Dianne Becker, and the eight incredible young men who participated in this study.

## INTRODUCTION

All students deserve a high-quality education; however, assessments indicate that young adolescent African American males are not performing as high as other groups of students in language arts and reading. The observed differences in literacy skill levels and acquisition rates led me to investigate the factors that contribute to the differing outcomes. To determine the answer to the question "How can I increase the literacy of the unmotivated African American males whom I teach?," I have been prompted to examine instructional strategies, classroom environments, and models of teacher-student relationships that would improve the reading and the writing ability of African American males and would encourage more active participation in class from this group of students. It is imperative that teachers use methods that will equally benefit students of all genders and races; however, because of the documented literacy disparities between African American males and males of other races (Perie, M., Grigg, W.S., & Donahue, P.L., 2005; Tatum, 2005; Taylor, 2004), attention must focus on efforts that will prevent further discrepancies for this group of students and will promote a narrowing of this literacy gap. In order to stimulate such results, teachers must educate themselves on the characteristics of the African American culture and on pedagogical methods that are specifically responsive to the needs of African American males. Furthermore, teachers must apply such knowledge and have the agency to reflect on their personal beliefs and teaching practices to analyze if they are meeting the learning needs of the students whom they teach, particularly the African American males in the classroom.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Instructional Strategies that Benefit African American Males

According to Triplett (2004), students' motivation for literacy learning is directly linked to their interests; therefore, after determining the interests of the unmotivated African American male students in the classroom, it is possible to use their interests to help the students select texts and participate in learning activities. Regarding text selections, research has shown that boys are more interested in texts that contain male characters, that are analytical and contain facts, and that are male-oriented in the themes and issues presented in the text. However, although interest should be used to motivate students to read and learn, students should be exposed to all types of literature and subjects, not just those in which they demonstrate interest. Because reading is often associated with females, boys who see reading as a feminine activity and do not wish to be categorized as "feminine" generally disengage from the activity. Therefore, in order to increase their motivation to read, it could be important to provide males with African American masculine reading role models and to involve them in boys-only book clubs so they can be assured that reading is not a gender-specific activity (Tatum, 2005; Taylor, 2004). An awareness of student interests can do more than merely assist in text selection; it can also be used to increase the class participation of African American males through the incorporation of meaningful examples and the selection of class activities that are aligned with the interests of the students. Since student interests are related to student engagement, it is imperative that teachers connect content to the interests of the African American males in the classroom in order further their learning (Taylor, 2004).

As mentioned, student interest should influence a teacher's selection and suggestion of texts. However, teachers also have a responsibility to provide students with appropriate literature, but such literature can be used to motivate the learning of African American males because it can address students' concerns, values, and interests (Tatum, 2000; Tatum, 2005; Taylor, 2004). African American males in low-level reading groups would particularly benefit from culturally responsive texts, as it would "help African American students understand changes in history, substantiate their existence, and critically examine the present as a mechanism for political, social, and cultural undertakings that may arise in the future" (Tatum, 2000). Most importantly, culturally relevant literature for African American males enables such students to credit their existence and creates a platform for addressing issues that are meaningful and relative to the global African American community. Moreover, such literature would inform students of all races about topics such as

discrimination, the consequences of personal choices, and the inalienable rights of Americans. Appropriate literature for African American males includes texts that promote multiple types of literacy, such as computer or emotional literacy (Taylor, 2004), and is at a challenging but not frustrating level for a student to read given his skills (Tatum, 2005).

Compartmentalized instruction, often a feature of many reading classrooms, is not a beneficial instructional strategy for African American males (Langer, 2001); instead, this group of students needs to see and be able to make their own connections among what they are learning in their classes, what they already know, and what is occurring in the world. Incorporating students' prior knowledge is one reading instructional strategy that can increase the comprehension of African American males and can enable students to chunk information from their short-term memory into their long-term memory (Roe & Smith, 2005). In addition, it builds bridges between content and students' knowledge and experiences, which reinforces learning (Lipman, 1995; Ladson-Billings & Henry, 1990). Within the language arts classroom, it is necessary that vocabulary, literature, and learning activities connect and reinforce content. As Dole, Sloan, and Trathen (as cited in Tatum, 2000, p.59) suggests, "Using literature selections to teach students the meaning of words is more effective than assigning vocabulary words at random." Not only does the language arts content need to be linked to students' prior knowledge and integrated with other content areas, but it also needs to relate to the real world (Langer, 2001; Foster, 1992). When assisting students in the construction of connections, teachers should overtly show how things connect and why such connections are important (Langer, 2001); such discussions lead to an increase in comprehension and provide scaffolding for students. Furthermore, according to McCarthy (as cited in Triplett, 2004, p.215), such students need "opportunities to connect their literate selves with other aspects of their identity," which indicates that teachers should have an in-depth knowledge of the students whom they teach and should use such knowledge to help students incorporate their interests and talents into what they read and write. Regarding student connections, Banks and Banks (1995) advocate that students be encouraged to construct their own views and connections without dependence on the teacher; this increases the independence of the learners, and adolescents often view independence as a male trait. Being able to make connections to the written world is essential for all students, but this strategy validates the students' knowledge and experiences, increases their comprehension, and gives meaning to what they are learning, particularly for African American males.

Hurdles that often prevent many African American males from achievement in language arts and reading classrooms are weak decoding skills, inferior fluency, poor comprehension, and a lack of prior knowledge about the

text's content (Roe & Smith, 2005). Because of these hurdles, it is imperative that teachers equip students with the strategies they need to read and to write successfully. Not having the necessary skills to read or write affects motivation, which is why it is essential to address the areas of weakness in students' literacy abilities. In order to be effective in empowering students to successfully work through tasks without relying on the teacher, such strategies need to be modeled and explicitly taught to students (Langer, 2001). These strategies should be taught in a manner that is appealing to African American males, which includes activities that are concrete, promote problem-solving, are interactive and social, and use student investigations as a method for learning (Taylor, 2004; Banks & Banks, 1995). In order for such strategies to be beneficial to students, the pupils need to develop an awareness about their own reading and writing performance. In order for students to know what strategy to use, they must first recognize the hurdle that they are facing. Langer (2001) provides research that demonstrates the effectiveness of student reflections in fostering metacognition in students.

Teachers should be explicit in their instruction of reading and writing strategies, and teaching these skills by using appropriate literature (Tatum, 2000), thus heightening the connections that students are able to make by showing that the skills being learned are actually necessary and relevant. By teaching reading strategies to students, they are able to learn the skills necessary to become better readers and writers. Furthermore, by providing opportunities for them to use the skills that have been learned and practiced, students are able to play the game while improving their development of the related skills. It is similar to a basketball player. Players have to practice dribbling and shooting, but in order to truly improve their abilities, players need more than practice sessions; they need to get into the game. A player needs opportunities to get off the bench, for skills that have been rehearsed at practices are enhanced as the player receives such chances. "Playing in the game" can include such activities such as literature circles, fishbowls, free reading, free writing, and readers' theater (Langer, 2001; Taylor, 2004; Roe & Smith, 2005). Literature circles meet to discuss texts that have been commonly read by the group, and in fishbowls, individuals select topics and questions to which the participants respond. Free writing and free reading enable individuals to select their own topics and texts, while readers' theater engages readers by having them act out what they read in a text. These are all highly motivating activities for African American males because they incorporate student interests, address multiple learning profiles, and involve social interactions; in addition, the activities influence student learning by resulting in closer text readings and increased comprehension for the reader.

An important element of teaching middle level students is an understanding of the need and desire of this age group to engage in social interaction with others. It is essential that teachers use instructional activities that allow students to work collaboratively in groups. Research shows that students are more engaged in learning when social activities are present in the instruction, and since most middle school students value social interaction and the activities increase academic engagement, it is a valuable instructional strategy to use in motivating young adolescent African American males to learn. An additional benefit of collaborative groups is that by interacting with students of various races, religions, socioeconomic levels, and experiences, individuals are able to hear multiple perspectives and construct knowledge in unlimited ways (Langer, 2001; Triplett, 2004). Research suggests that such interactions improve the learning outcomes for non-white students (Ferguson & Mehta, 2004), and thus should be a benefit the teacher considers as he strives to advance the social and intellectual development of minority students.

Group work can promote shared cognition, as it enables students to achieve more as a group than could be attained individually and leads to supportive learning environments for students (Langer, 2001). However, such grouping is effective when groups are flexible and are not solely and consistently set according to ability. Because African American students are overrepresented in lower level groups, inflexible grouping prevents interactions with students of different readiness levels (Banks, 1995), impedes the intellectual growth of students, and negatively affects students' self-esteem (Ferguson & Mehta, 2004). When used, cooperative learning groups can greatly benefit African American students as well as students from other cultures who have preferences for group activities over individual activities, and can provide learning advantages for such students because group work is more congruent to the social norms of particular groups of students (Foster, 1992). To recapitulate, incorporating student interests and prior knowledge, equipping students with literacy strategies, and integrating social interactions into the curriculum are all methods that can increase the literacy of young adolescent African American males.

### Classroom Environments that Benefit African American Males

A fundamental influence of learning is the environment in which learning takes place (Langer, 2001). There are certain types of classroom environments that are more conducive to learning than others for African American males. In order to motivate African American males to learn, it is crucial that the classroom environment reflects this desire. In this context, the teacher holds most of the responsibility for the type of classroom environment that is fostered, and essential components that should exist in an ideal classroom for

African American males include: high standards for success, structure, shared control between the teacher and the students, and a respectful classroom community. Evidence of a teacher's high standards for students is indicated by the caliber of assignments, the expectations for the assignments, and the words and attitude of the teacher (Haycock, 2001). If students are often given low-level assignments, then it is clear that the teacher's understanding of the students' abilities is fallacious. However, successful teachers of African American males have high standards for the students' academic performance, which is evident in the quality of assignments that are given and in the expectations for student work (Lipman, 1995; Tatum, 2005). Instead of watered-down curriculum, students should have access to rigorous curriculum that promotes higher-level thinking (Haycock, 2001). Furthermore, Tatum (2005, p.34) explains the negative reciprocity that often exists between teachers and African American male students, which demonstrates the importance of presenting such students with a challenging curriculum: "On one hand, the student thinks the teacher does not care whether he learns, so he is less apt to make an effort. On the other hand, the teacher thinks that the student does not care about his learning so she puts forth minimal effort to teach him." Teachers should have confidence in their students' abilities, but teachers should realize that to help some students achieve at the high levels they are capable of, additional instruction and assistance from the teacher may be necessary (Langer, 2001; Haycock, 2001; Taylor, 2004). In addition, Walker (1992) relates research indicating that African American students value teachers who insist on high quality work from the students and push students to fulfill their potential.

Structure is another important element in transforming the classroom into an advantageous learning environment for African American males. Providing structure includes consistently enforcing classroom rules and following through in what is said or promised; however, a structured classroom does not insinuate that teachers are to be cruel or crabby (Tatum, 2000). Efficient use of all available instruction time is another method of providing structure for students. Although some classes may appear chaotic because students are talking, moving around the classroom, or working in small groups, structured classrooms are actually organized in such situations and the teachers are affective in facilitating both the activities and the students (Billings, 1990). Classroom structure does relate to the issue of control within a classroom, as Brozo (as cited in Taylor, 2004, p.294) states, "Choice and control are two ingredients commonly missing in instruction provided to adolescent boys who are not reading as would be expected for their grade level and who are disinterested and reluctant readers." Although African American males characteristically desire structure in the classroom, students should not be



stifled by the structure. The teacher should share control of the classroom with the students, which is evident by allowing students to determine their own reading selections; in addition, encouraging students to select their own texts is an important factor in motivating students to enjoy reading and to read voluntarily (Taylor, 2004). The teacher should foster independence and personal agency in the students, while the classroom environment should be favorable for such initiative to take place (Triplett, 2004). African American students typically value teachers who are directive, but they do not want dictators (Walker, 1992). Nor do young adolescent males want teachers who treat them as dependent infants. For African American middle school males to be motivated to learn, the teacher needs to provide structure in the classroom and be willing to share control of the classroom with the students.

In classrooms that are dominated by individual learning activities and a spirit of competitiveness, many African American males fail to thrive because the young are often ego achievement-centered and will act to save face rather than to master content (Foster, 1992). In contrast, supportive learning communities, where young men do not have to risk failure, are necessary for their success. Possible reasons for a lack of motivation include a fear of embarrassment and a desire to avoid negative criticism from the teacher (Tatum, 2000). Therefore, in order to create a supportive learning environment, the classroom community, which includes both the students and the teacher, must be willing to accept each other and to respect each other. This implies that the members should listen to each other and not ridicule or tease each other for responding with a wrong answer; for the members of the community realize that they are responsible to each other for fulfilling their personal obligations within the group and for helping others learn and achieve in the class.

### Teachers' Relationship to Student Motivation and Learning

In order for teachers to be effective in instructing and motivating African American males, it is essential that teachers know the students and apply their observations about the students and their pedagogical content knowledge to curriculum development. Furthermore, the quality of relationships between teachers and students is an additional factor that affects the motivation of African American males. Since students are not one-dimensional beings, teachers should be attentive to more than just the academic side of a student; what is occurring at home or with friends often affects learning (Banks & Banks, 1995). Knowledge about students' culture is beneficial for understanding and for communicating with the students in the classroom, which may require a teacher to invest in personal research and professional development in order to increase such knowledge. Students who are withdrawn from academics

may be reached and encouraged when the teacher has built a rapport with the students by showing interest in them as people not just as students and by taking initiative to talk with them about topics beyond school. Through assessments, the teacher should develop a recognition of students' strengths and weaknesses, which should inform the teacher's instructional choices (Ladson-Billings & Henry, 1990). In conclusion, the teacher ought to acquire a comprehensive view of students' academic strengths and weaknesses, interests, family, culture, and personality.

As teachers learn about the students with whom they work, such knowledge should be applied to teaching practices. For example, Foster (1992) has documented that the engagement and achievement of African American students can be increased by incorporating aspects of African American English such as alliteration, call and response, creative language play, repetition, and rhythmic language into instruction. After acquiring an awareness of students' learning profiles and interests, teachers should develop differentiated lessons that particularly address the learning styles of the students in the class. A teacher's instruction should reflect the readiness of students, which can be addressed by small group instruction and by allowing students to work at their own pace (Taylor, 2004; Tomlinson & McTighe, 2006); sensitivity to students' readiness is critical in reaching unmotivated students. Realistic views of students' readiness are important, but high standards and positive views of students are critical since it is reported that students' views of themselves as learners are directly related to the teacher's view of them (Walker, 1992).

Teachers who have positive relationships with students often report fewer behavioral problems and increase student motivation and achievement than teachers who do not seek to know students on a personal level (Triplett, 2004; Aspy & Roebuck, 1977). Shujaa (1995, p.196) claims that "who is teaching is as critical as what is taught," which underscores the influence that teacher-student relationships have on student motivation and student success in the classroom. Too often, ethnicity is a factor in how students are treated by their teachers; African Americans, especially when taught by white, middle-aged women, are the victims of stigmas in the classroom. If a teacher is not striving to meet a student's emotional needs, then the teacher is choosing to strip a student of the opportunity to achieve. Furthermore, the expectations and treatment of teachers contribute to children's self-efficacy, which students retain far longer than the one hundred eighty days that they spend in a teacher's classroom. Thus, equity pedagogy is evident in the social interactions that take place between teachers and students (Banks & Banks, 1995). Since it is the teachers who principally determine what type of influence is yielded on students in the classroom, it is essential that teachers proactively establish classroom

environments and exchanges with students that foster respect. Qualities of affirmative relationships include an acceptance of students' feelings and ideas, an effective use of praise, and a constructive method of problem solving (Aspy & Roebuck, 1977). A mutual respect is promoted when teachers display positive regard for students of all races and who demonstrate trustworthiness and an appreciation for each member of the classroom community. Mentoring and advocacy are additional components of positive relationships between students and teachers, for it provides students with someone at school with whom they can confer and who will advocate for them when needed (Lipman, 1995).

### Influences of Literature on the Study

It is vital to emphasize that not all African American males are unmotivated and not all perform lower than other races; however, overall, there is a disparity between this group of students and other learners which is often linked to a lack of literacy skill acquisition suspected to come from a lack of self-motivation to acquire such skills. Although a significant number of African American males are unmotivated to learn and experience difficulty in language arts and reading, it is possible to engage students and to increase achievement by utilizing appropriate instructional strategies, by fostering a supportive learning environment, and by developing positive relationships with students. Various instructional methods include the incorporation of students' interests into the lessons, selecting appropriate literature, making connections with the content, arming students with strategies that will help their areas of weakness, and in employing group instruction. Although all of these instructional methods are applied to reading and language arts in this context, they can be used effectively in other contents for the same purpose of benefiting this group of students without disenfranchising the rest of the class; in fact, the majority of these strategies will profit the class as a whole and not just the African American male students. In relation, the classroom environment affects all students, but to promote an atmosphere that is conducive to African American males, qualities such as high expectations for the success of all students, structure, shared control of the classroom between the teacher and the students, and a supportive learning community. A third method of increasing motivation and achievement requires the teacher to learn about the many dimensions of the students and to use such knowledge to craft instructional practices suited to the needs and interests of students while developing positive relationships with them. The combination of all of these practices leads to a practice that is culturally responsive and invites African American males to participate and grow as learners.

## METHODOLOGY

Participants in this study included eight fifth grade African American male students from Creekside Elementary School in Milledgeville, Georgia, and one African American college student from Georgia College & State University. This study took place at Creekside Elementary School in Milledgeville, Georgia. The eight students were chosen based on their reading performance in school and recommendations from their reading teacher. This study began in February 2008 and concluded in April 2008. Students met once a week, outside of their academic classes, with their literature group.

This was the second round of data collection for my study on how to improve the literacy of young adolescent African American males. Originally, my study involved twelve seventh grade students from Georgia Military College Prep School in Milledgeville, Georgia. Data collection with this group of students involved Qualitative Reading Inventories, reading interest surveys, and interviews. However, the results from this initial data collection did not yield conclusive information regarding how to improve the literacy of these students. I simply learned about their particular reading interests, heard their opinions about student-teacher relationships, respect, and reading, and pinpointed their specific literacy challenges such as fluency, comprehension, or prior knowledge. Because this data did not yield results that related to my question or could provide similar outcomes to other researchers in comparable contexts, I chose to initiate a second round of data collection that focused on the affect that role models have on young adolescent African American male students.

In this second round of data collection, the eight participants from Creekside Elementary were divided into two reading groups. An African American male college student led one group, and I, their social studies student teacher, led the second group. Within these groups, the students selected a book to read as a group, and each student and leader received a copy of their group's respective book. They determined how many pages or chapters they read in between sessions, and the adult leader initiated discussions based on the book and had the students read a selection aloud when they met. Discussions centered on the students' opinions and thoughts of the text and how the text relates to their lives; however, the group leader was free to pursue other topics of discussions with the students. During these groups, I observed and took notes about students' behavior, their interactions with each other and with the adult leader, and about whether or not the strategies and activities implemented in the lessons appeared to improve the students' abilities to read or to write. As their social studies teacher, I made notes of the students' behavior, performance, and interactions outside of the literature groups.

The notes and observations that I recorded about the students and the literature groups during the study enabled me to review the effectiveness of the strategies and the methods of instruction that were used within the groups. It enabled me to compare and contrast the relationships within the groups, the influence that these relationships had on the students, and the students' interest in reading in order to determine the significance of young adolescent African American males having African American male role models in school. I was particularly interested in determining if the students were positively affected by the presence of a role model or if the gender and race of the role model altered the influence on the students.

Based on research gathered for my literature review, I learned the significance of social activity to males, which is why the literature groups were selected as the literacy activity in which the students would engage. Discussing texts and other topics with an adult and with other students adds enjoyment to the task, which can improve the students' views towards reading. Regarding the social component of these literature groups, my focus on the relationships between the students and the adult role model was to determine whether or not the students preferred to have role models of the same gender and race and to compare and contrast the relationships between the students and role models of the two groups. Both leaders strove to build positive relationships with the students in their group, and using my observations, I intended to determine how these relationships affected the motivation, the literacy, the academic performance, and the behavior of the students in this study.

Students were allowed to choose the text that their group read in order to increase the likelihood of their participation and their motivation to read because their interest and their voice led to the selection of their group's text. However, the students had to come to a consensus regarding the book that they read in order to ensure that all in the group chose the text. The students selected for this study were poor readers, and because research suggests that many boys disengage from reading because it is typically associated as a female activity, an intention of this study was to determine whether the gender of the role model actually affected the motivation for reading of the students in the groups.

First of all, no illegal activities were involved in this study. Secondly, in order to participate in this study, the students had to sign assent informs, and parents or guardians were required to sign consent forms of the minors who participated in this study. Accompanying the assent and consent forms were letters that informed the individuals of the purpose and activities involved in this study so the participants were knowingly assenting to participate. As far as I could foresee, there was no stress related to this study, as participants could opt out of the study at any time. In addition, participation did not affect the

grades of the volunteers in any way, and the confidentiality of the participants will be protected. Any video or audiotapes used in the study will be destroyed within five years of the completion of this study. The participants are referred to using pseudonyms in the data collection and reports involved in this study.

### Results and Implications of the Research Study

In this study, my personal observations and notes were the records of the occurrences that transpired within these groups and with the eight students in class during the course of this research study. Group A was led by \*Rodney, a sophomore African American male middle grades major, and in this group were five students: \*Kenan, Anton, Jay, Stephen, and Javion. Kenan, Jay, and Javion are struggling readers whose academic performance is poor, and although Anton and Stephen are average students who enjoy reading, both of these students are in desperate need of a positive male role model, which is why the teachers on our fifth grade team suggested their inclusion in this study. I led group B, and there were three students in this group: \*Mark, Kevin, and Rocky. These students were the first names suggested by the reading teacher because their decoding skills, fluency, and comprehension are so inferior. Regarding the results of the data collection, there were definite trends that I noticed when reviewing my transcripts from the literature group meetings; however, the patterns that I noticed raised more questions and suggested that further study should be done on this topic. Results from the data collection were catalogued into three different categories: academic performance, behavior, and relationships.

Both of the groups engaged in the same activities: learning about each other, selecting a book, determining how much of the book to read in between meetings, reading a selection of the book when together, and discussing what had been read and how it connected to what the students knew and had experienced. Yet the responses of the students within the groups and in their classes differed. For example, although the reading ability of the participants in group B were lower than that of the participants in group A, the students in group B were more faithful in reading the weekly selections than the students in group A. Furthermore, the students in group B participated more in their social studies class after joining this group, a class in which they all struggled. For instance, all three of the students began taking notes in social studies and moved seats in order to be closer to the front. There was one day in which Rocky, who rarely participated in class before the beginning of this study, shared with the class a comparison and connection to the content that demonstrated higher-level thinking and close attention to the material. A result of the reading role model and the social studies teacher being the same person could have been a possible reason for the improvement of the three

boys in group B, especially since our group time enabled me to build stronger relationships with each of them than I had been able to do during class. I could devote more attention to each individual when the group consisted of three instead of when the class consisted of thirty. Therefore, positive attention and relationships might have been a motivation for the improved academic performance in our social studies class.

Within the reading group, group B was more focused on completing the weekly reading assignments than group A, and although there were moments during each session that we would discuss topics beyond the book, they generally stayed on task. In our initial group meetings, Kevin and Rocky were especially concerned with reading for Accelerated Reader (AR) points. Because AR points affected the students' grades and because their reading teacher did not allow them to go to recess if they do not have a certain number of AR points, this could attribute to their dedication to completing the reading. In fact, when they were selecting a book to read, the initial factor that attracted them to particular books was the amount of AR points that the book yielded. However, Mark persuaded them to stop focusing on AR points and to choose a book because they thought that they would enjoy reading it. From this, I deduced that there was a correlation between AR points as a motivator and Rocky, Kevin, and Mark's dedication to complete the reading assignments and to participate in reading selections during our meetings. Also unknown was whether or not such motivation would be related to an intrinsic competitive desire to have a certain number of AR points, an external aspiration to obtain enough points to participate in recess, or an internal motivator to please their reading teacher or myself.

In group B, all three of the boys clamored to read out loud when we met. However, in all of the sessions of group A, only three of the participants would volunteer to read portions aloud, and these three students were the weaker readers in the group. It is interesting to note that group A read an easier text than group B and that the students in group A had fewer problems with decoding and fluency than group B, yet the students in group B were more willing to read aloud than those in group A. After spending eight weeks in the classroom with these students, I noticed that the students in group B were friends before these literature groups began and that in group A the boys were more concerned with upholding their image. For example, Stephen remained aloof, Jay was concerned with his appearance, Kenan tried to be a "ladies man" and to appear tough, Anton was sarcastic and was quick to bully others, and Javion was too naïve to notice that the others in the group had established a standard "cool pose." The two who did not read aloud in this group were Stephen and Anton, and from my host teacher, I learned that both of these boys have extremely unstable home situations. Based on Abraham



Maslow's theory regarding a hierarchy of needs, it is my conjecture that the safety and emotional needs of these students negatively affected how they behaved and how they wanted others to perceive them, which influenced whether or not they would read in front of other people. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) report that males are less likely to discuss or respond to their reading and that the frequency and severity of the criticism that they receive for weaknesses in reading and writing is more than girls receive. These insights are possible reasons for why Stephen and Anton were not as willing to participate as the other students. They may have had negative past experiences with reading aloud, or they might not have wanted to appear weak or to be ostracized for possibly making a mistake.

In both groups, the reading role models used various strategies to help the participants while reading. For example, both Rodney and I helped our respective participants create a purpose for reading, which guides readers by helping them focus on the important ideas and critical information that is in the text (Tovani, 2004). We were explicit in explaining such strategies to the students, describing that such strategies can be applied to other texts, and providing the students with opportunities to practice such strategies within our groups. For example, we both asked our students to establish a purpose for reading various chapters based on what happened in the last chapter. In group A, Stephen suggested that their book was about segregation after reading the back cover, and one of the purposes that this group set for the entire book was to determine whether or not the book actually discussed segregation. Stephen's suggestion enabled their group to discuss the meaning of segregation, whether or not the boys had ever experienced prejudice, and whether or not they would have been scared to live in the 1960s when racism and prejudice towards African Americans was more prominent in America. After Rodney explained the definitions of racism and prejudice, each of the participants, including Rodney, mentioned that they had experienced both racism and prejudice. In *Teaching Reading to Black Adolescent Males*, Alfred Tatum (2005) comments that black males should think about what it means to be a black male in America, despised because of one's skin color, the descendants of an enslaved group, distrusted because of one's race, and subjected to low expectations. Having taught two semesters in situations where the majority of my students were African American, I have realized that I do not truly know the answers to these questions because I have not experienced any of these things. I can try to empathize and understand, but honestly, I cannot relate beyond a certain point because of my different background and my inexperience with such situations. My ability as a white female to identify with African American males is affected by these dissimilarities, but because African American males share a similar culture and answers to these questions, African American males would



not be as limited as me in such circumstances. From my student-teaching experiences, I am convinced that African American males assuredly benefit from having mentors with whom they can identify and who share similar life experiences, but even if my race, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, and prior experiences are completely different than the students with whom I work, I can and should still advocate for these students, assist them in learning, and strive to establish positive relationships with them.

Regarding the behavior of the participants, I noticed that the students' behavior was vastly improved when they were in the groups than when they were in their classes. I attribute this to the smaller number of students in the groups as compared to the classrooms. For example, the ratio of adults to students in the groups was 1:5 and 1:3 respectively, but in the classroom, the ratio was approximately 1:28. With these smaller ratios, the students were receiving more attention and were able to build closer relationships with the adult than they were in their classrooms. It is a challenge to truly get to know students and to give them the attention that they need when one teaches one hundred twenty students in four hours. One reason why role models and mentors are so beneficial to students is because they often work with smaller numbers of students and are, therefore, able to supply more attention to the students. In relation, with smaller numbers in both class sizes and in mentor groups, it is possible to better assist students in improving their academics because there are fewer students to divide the teacher's attention.

In relation to book selection, group B's participants deliberated between more challenging texts than did the students in group A, although they admitted that their primary concern was originally the number of AR points the book listed. However, other factors on which Rocky, Kevin, and Mark commented included texts with engaging covers, books that were part of a series with which they were familiar, or books that were movies. In fact, Kevin tried to convince Mark and Rocky to choose *Around the World in Eighty Days*, and when I asked him why he was so dogmatic about selecting this book, he said it was because the cover looked "cool." Of the nine books they originally suggested, only one is not a movie, and all of the books that they selected are either fantasy or science fiction, which is more challenging to read than biographies or realistic fiction.

In contrast, group A originally looked at picture books and short-chapter books when determining their text selection; however, Rodney encouraged them to pick something a bit more challenging. Their choices leaned towards books that were easy to read, contained pictures, or involved football or basketball, such as a biography of Brett Favre. With all males, research documents that males prefer activities that they feel competent in doing (Willhelm & Smith, 2002). One reason why I think group A's participants

originally chose easier books was because they felt more confident about their ability to read them; this sense of competence and confidence is crucial to the male ego, especially when interacting with a stranger. Csikszentmihalyi's theory regarding flow experiences centers on feelings of competence and control (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), and in relation to the literacy of young adolescent African American males, they will not willingly engage in an activity such as reading if they know that they have insufficient skills to complete the activity because they feel like it is a situation in which they have no control. An effective use of praise, an abundance of encouragement, and a supportive environment are all conditions that a teacher or role model could use to give a student a sense of control and to support them in taking a risk in order to increase their competence in reading. Because we were unable to obtain six copies of a Brett Favre biography within the week, they chose *The Watsons go to Birmingham, 1963* by Christopher Paul Curtis. Willhelm and Smith (2002) remark that boys generally enjoy escapism, which could account for group B's preference of fantasy and science fiction books; however, they report that boys also like to read about their interests and hobbies, which relates to group A's original selections.

Regarding text selection, this is attributed to the interests of the particular students involved; however, it was crucial that the students chose their text because of the link between interest and literacy motivation (Triplett, 2004; Willhelm & Smith, 2002). In addition, my observations from this study lead me to believe that student motivation for reading can be affected by their role model's enthusiasm for reading. For example, the students in group B chose to read the first book in the Harry Potter series, and after they had selected this book, I shared with them how I had started reading this series over the Christmas break and how they are some of the best books that I have ever read because each chapter is a different adventure. We discussed the cover of the book and what types of adventures we thought Harry and his friends would have based on the cover's illustration. Stephen from group A began reading this book after hearing Mark, Rocky, and Kevin discussing it. My excitement for reading could correlate with their discipline and motivation in reading their assigned portions.

With group A, Rodney frontloaded the book when he introduced it to the boys by telling them how humorous the book is and how the two brothers always seem to have something funny happen to them. The boys accepted this book as their choice after he suggested it, and since they started reading it, the common statement that I heard each of the group A participants utter related to how comical this book is. To accept a book which has a dull cover and about which they knew nothing indicates that they were influenced by Rodney's comments regarding the book. Since their comments regarding the

book mimic Rodney's introductory statements about this text, it is possible that their relationship with Rodney influenced their perspective towards the text and towards reading. A possible reason for why role models can influence perceptions towards particular books or towards reading is because of the social factor. In "Reading Don't Fix No Chevy's," Smith and Willhelm (2002) discuss the effect that socialization has on males and reading. This can include reading with others, which enormously increases a male's intrinsic motivation and engagement in the activity, but can also extend to reading a book because it was suggested or given by someone with whom the individual has a relationship. I believe that this played a factor in the participants' views toward their respective books.

Although I knew the participants and taught each of them for an entire month before we began the literature groups, I was shocked by the difference in the interactions that the participants had with Rodney and myself. Although the students in both groups enjoyed the sessions and routinely asked to meet more than once a week, the boys in group A treated Rodney differently than they did me. Although I was their social studies teacher and had more interactions with them, their connection and respect for Rodney seemed instantaneous. With Stephen in particular, it took me two months to earn his respect for my authority, yet he demonstrated such respect towards Rodney in their first meeting when Rodney was a stranger to him. During the first meeting of group A when the participants were introducing themselves to Rodney, they each told him these absurd nicknames that they obviously made up on the spur of the moment and which neither my host teacher or I had ever heard anyone call them. However, it was obvious that they were trying to impress Rodney and that they wanted him to like them, and Rodney took them seriously and called them each by their nicknames. In fact, it was not until about a week later that Rodney knew their real names. I did not have this experience either on the first day with group B, the first day that I taught at this placement or the first time I spoke with these same students. The relationship that the participants in group A had with Rodney was quite different than the relationship that the students in group B had with me. For instance, the students in group A sought Rodney's opinion and thoughts about topics beyond school while the boys in group B were not as open with me regarding topics extending beyond school. This could be attributed to the fact that I was their teacher and Rodney was viewed more as a friend or a cool college student, or it could be because he is a male or is an African American while I am a white female. The difference in the relationships was not necessarily negative because both relationships between the group leader and the students were positive, but it does show that Rodney and I had varying abilities to influence the students. I suggest that his abilities to influence the

students were greater than mine because he had more in common with them than I did. It is necessary to explain that academics are important, but a child is more than just a student. In order to improve the student, one must address the child as a whole and realize that a child's home life, prior experiences at school, physical well-being, and friendships will affect the child's performance at school (Banks & Banks, 1995). Role models and mentors can assist students' academic performance by attending to the whole child and not just their struggles with reading comprehension or decoding, which is why both literature group leaders invited and welcomed such discussions by the participants.

Even after being with the students for a month, I still used the first session and segments of the other sessions to ask Mark, Rocky, and Kevin questions and to get to know them better, and Rodney did the same with group A. Although we both asked questions of the students in our respective groups, the boys in group A took more initiative in asking Rodney questions and in bringing up topics for discussion than the participants in group B. Several of the questions and discussion topics that they mentioned were personal, such as things that scare them. The fact that the students replied to such topics indicated that they trusted the group members enough to willingly appear vulnerable in front of them. After conversing about this, Rodney and I both felt like the students initiated such discussions because they wanted to know his fears and his responses to the questions. We arrived at this conclusion because of the body language of the participants, for each time they asked such a question, they leaned into the middle of the circle and looked straight at Rodney. It was as if they wanted his confirmation that it was acceptable to have fears or that one could still be masculine and have an interest in art. Smith and Wilhelm (2002) state that males receive their sense of masculinity from other males. In relation, male role models and mentors have a greater ability to influence African American males because they can answer questions such as what it means to be a male. Since reading and writing are often viewed as feminine activities, having male role models for reading assists male students in perceiving literacy as a masculine and feminine activity, which increases student motivation. In relation, knowing that a gap exists between the literacy skills of African American males and males of other races, incorporating reading role models and mentors in schools could improve literacy discrepancies in our country by focusing on the whole child and presenting reading as a masculine activity.

When I began my second round of data collection, it was my original conjecture that the participants would be influenced more by the presence of an African American male role model than by a white female role model. Although my conjecture was accurate, I had understated the affect that would result from the students having an adult advocate who is a white female. For

example, the participants in group B yielded more improvements in their literacy and academic performance; however, this could have been attributed to my preparation as a language arts teacher while Rodney had no such training. Ultimately, I realized that it is possible for me to positively affect the literacy and the behavior of young adolescent African American males through establishing positive relationships with the students and by investing more of my time and attention into them; however, because of my inability to understand what it is like to be male and African American, I have also realized the necessity of providing African American male students with role models with whom they can relate and who can assist them in viewing literacy as an appropriate activity for males.

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